Progressive Muscle Relaxation Could Help Relieve Symptoms of RA

by ERIC PATTERSON

PMR for Rheumatoid Arthritis

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) hurts. When your own immune system mistakenly attacks your joints, you feel sore, stiff and fatigued. Your energy is reduced and your mood drops. The psychological impact of RA becomes as detrimental as the physical impact. If only you could feel better physically, you could feel better mentally.

If the above sounds familiar, progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) might be right for you. PMR is a technique that mental health clinicians have been teaching for years to clients with anxiety. During exposure to anxiety and stress, muscles become tense and tightened. Over time, the person with anxiety will begin to see the tension as normal and will lack the skills to find relaxation. PMR is a systematic way to find the relaxation.

Squeeze and Release

Even if anxiety does not accompany your RA, consider using PMR to relieve your soreness and to loosen your stiff muscles and joints. Here's how to make PMR work for you:

- **Be careful –** This first tip is an important one. Consult with your doctor to be sure that PMR is right for you. If you ever feel pain that becomes too intense, revise and modify the exercise. PMR is a gentle experience to reduce pain, not add to it.
- **Set the mood –** Finding the right spot to relax may take some experimentation. Try the bedroom, living room or even bathroom as you search for relaxation. Music, candles or scents can set the scene further. Also think about when it is best for you to relax. Find the time of day that makes sense for you.
- **Scan your body –** Once you are in your relaxation location, take a few moments to listen to your body. Start with your toes and move up towards your head. Which areas are feeling tender or stiff? Which areas feel loose and relaxed? Sometimes, with RA, you may feel that your whole body hurts but if you take the time to scan, you can identify that only certain spots are affected.

- **Tense –** People with RA often have pain and discomfort in their hands so this is a great place to start. PMR starts by tensing an area for five to ten seconds. Your hands are tensed by making a fist and holding it tight. Alternatively, you can achieve another type of tensing by opening your hands fully and spreading your fingers as wide as you can. Many areas in your body have multiple ways of tensing. Trial and error will help you find your best options.
- **Release –** After your period of tensing the area, release the hold. Allow your hands to slowly and naturally open to a neutral position. Feel the relaxation flood in as the tension fades away. This might be the first time in months or years that your hands have experienced relaxation. Complete the cycle of tensing and releasing two or three times to achieve full relaxation and then begin move to other areas of your body that are high in tension.

Conclusion

Some people prefer to move from head to toe with PMR. Others prefer to move from toe to head, but there is no right or wrong way to complete progressive muscle relaxation. Be aware, though, that PMR takes time to be useful and even longer to master. But once you find success, using PMR for rheumatoid arthritis will be another effective tool in your toolbox, available to utilize when the time is right.